

Disney Gives Up Plans for Park at Historic Site

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Walt Disney Co. unexpectedly hoisted a white flag Wednesday on the Civil War battlefields of Virginia, abandoning its preferred site for the \$650-million "Disney's America" theme park that had been pilloried as a vulgar commercial assault on a piece of the nation's most hallowed ground.

Disney vowed not to scrap the project itself, however, and announced that it will search for a less controversial location for the historical theme park, preferably still in Virginia.

Disney executives made the decision despite support from top Virginia political leaders, including Gov. George F. Allen. Just last week, Disney had won favorable rulings for zoning and transportation projects.

But opposition from leading historians, members of Congress and local residents near the proposed site in Haymarket, Va., 40 miles west of Washington, appeared to be growing by the day. Disney's abrupt about-face drew quick praise from opponents.

"We are delighted that Disney has decided to take a responsive and commendable course, recognizing the genuine concern of both historian and environmentalist," said historian James McPherson of Princeton University and a leading opponent. "We wish them well in their search for another site that will not impact other historical areas."

Disney unveiled its grandiose plans in November, 1993, and the project has been embroiled in controversy ever since.

The proposed theme park and mixed-use development has been

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attacked by leading historians and environmentalists and debated in congressional hearings. Last month, about 3,000 opponents marched in Washington to protest the development.

Anticipating as many 30,000 visitors a day, the park's planners had contemplated such attractions as a Lewis and Clark raft ride, a virtual-reality display in which visitors could "fight" in Civil War battles and a high-speed train ride through the Industrial Revolution. Plans to create an attraction that would allow visitors to "experience" slavery were dropped after public criticism.

In addition to the theme park, the plans for the remainder of the huge site included a subdivision of more than 2,000 homes, up to 2 million square feet of commercial development, 1,300 hotel rooms, two golf courses and a 283-acre campsite.

Pam Gagne of Protect Prince William County, a group opposed to the park, said she was pleased Disney "finally saw the light."

"Their reputation as an environmentally conscious company will be upheld. They made the right decision. This was not the right spot for it," she said.

The 3,000-acre site is located in a region rich with early American history. The area was home to four

of the nation's first five presidents, and the development would sit only four miles from the site of the Civil War's bloody Battles of Manassas. The development itself would sit on the former campgrounds of Union and Confederate troops, according to some historians.

Claiming the project would "vulgarize" history, more than 200 prominent historians, including David McCullough, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author who narrated public television's 1990 "Civil War" series, formed Protect Historic America to oppose the park's construction.

The project's supporters, which included many local businesses as well as Virginia's political leadership, had maintained Disney's America would prove an economic boon. They criticized the opponents as elitists.

Disney's withdrawal comes only a week after the Prince William County Planning Commission approved rezoning plans to allow the park's construction. And a regional transportation commission approved \$130-million worth of road projects that would help ease traffic congestion created by the park.

But Disney could draw on its own history to recognize the handwriting on the wall.

The company proposed 28 years

ago to build a major ski resort in the scenic Mineral King Valley in the Sierra Nevada. Twelve years passed before that project died at the hands of Congress when an omnibus parks measure added the valley to Sequoia National Park and prohibited downhill skiing.

The lesson of Mineral King is well-known at Disney, even though the Michael Eisner-led management team took over in 1984, six years after the ski resort project died. Unlike the abandoned ski resort, however, Disney insiders insist they intend to find another site for the history-themed park, and named new managers for the project.

Disney Channel President John F. Cooke will take on the additional role of chairman of Disney's America, while Dana Nottingham was promoted to president. Nottingham has served as director of development on the project. The two executives will assume the tasks of Mark Pacala, who is leaving Disney to run the Forum Group Inc., a company specializing in retirement communities.

Some on Wall Street would just as soon Disney forgot about it, however. One respected analyst applauded the decision and predicted that Disney will scrap the project. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, the analyst said that some top executives—including the recently ousted studio chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg—had opposed the park as ill-timed.